DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 345 PS 018 639

AUTHOR Mirabelli, Alan
TITLE Family Issues for the Nineties.
INSTITUTION Vanier Inst. of the Family, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE 14 Apr 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Regional Family Studies Teachers Conference (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, April 14, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Birth Rate; Day Care; Divorce; Early Childhood Education; Employed Women; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Influence; Family Size; Foreign Countries; *Futures (of Society); Government Role; Job Performance; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Canada; *Family Policy; Family Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This presentation reviews the characteristics of the Canadian family at present. Discussion focuses on divorce, family structure, reproductive technology, fertility, family size, family mobility, family support, government role, women's participation in the labor force, daily family routines, television viewing, work and the family, the need for and lack of child care, family influences on job performance, family responsibilities, work environment and corporate change, and population trends. It is asserted that the primary issue for the 1990s and beyond will be the extent to which society will treat families with children as significant contributors to the society and therefore worthy of support by those who do not have children. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED316345

PERSPECTIVES

THE VANIER INSTITUTE OF THE FAMILY / L'INSTITUT VANIER DE LA FAMILLE
120 Holland, Ottawa, Canada K1Y 0X6 (613) 722-4007

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FAMILY ISSUES FOR THE NINETIES

An address presented to the

Ottawa Board of Education
Regional Family Studies Teachers Conference
sponsored by the
Ministry of Education
and
Ottawa Board of Education

April 14, 1989
Ottawa

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Vanier Institute of the Family
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Alan Mirabelli

PS 018339

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FAMILY ISSUES FOR THE NINETIES

About the only thing that can be said with any kind of certainty when talking about family issues for the nineties is that family will continue to be an integral part of most of our lives for the foreseeable future. In spite of the often quoted assertions that "family is dead", love and marriage is outdated, nobody stays married anymore, kids only want to have a good time and don't want to settle down, it is interesting to remember that in the last three annual Decima polls published in **Macleans** magazine, families continue to rate highest among the sources of personal satisfaction identified by Canadians, higher than politics, job, religion etc.

While the divorce rate has increased in recent years, remarriage has also shown a significant increase in popularity. And the vast majority, some 84.6% in 1981, still live in families.

But the form of family is not what it was twenty or thirty years ago, and it continues to change. The nuclear family of two employed parents with children at home is by far the most predominant form of family life for those families with children. The so-called "traditional" family, however, with husband only in the labour force is no longer the most prevalent form of family. Only 30% of all families with children and 24% of all families can claim to be "traditional" father at work, mother at home type of arrangement.

To the extent that we can predict anything, it is probably safe to say that more that 1 in 3 marriages entered today can be expected to end in divorce. A very large minority of children will experience life in a one-parent family, most often a female-headed family, during their childhood or

youth. And with the rates of remarriage on the increase, the number of re-combined or blended families will also feature more predominantly in our image of family life. Instead of asking how many children a parent has, we need to ask how many parents a child has.

This is also true in another area of family life which will play an ever increasing role in the nineties. It is the area of reproductive technology. At a time when many couples choose to limit the number of children in their family, and when the Canadian birth rate is falling below replacement levels, science is now opening the door to a whole new range of options for parenting. Still very much in its infancy (if you will excuse the pun), reproductive technology presents many challenges to our values. It has left the legal system far behind as it creates the most unimagined relationships between birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, social parents, biological fathers, adoptive fathers, natural parents, gamete donors, and so on.

As well as providing some limited hope to infertile couples, many of the reproductive technologies carry with them the promise or threat of genetic manipulation, test-tube embryos, cloning, sex selection and the eugenic possibilities. What we are looking at is the division and separation of the once conjoined roles of genetic, biological and social parentage, obviously something to give us all considerable pause for thought.

With young adults continuing to choose to have fewer children, the look and feel of family is changing. The extended network of kin support is noticeably smaller today. This is not to suggest a yearning for some kind

of romantic view of families past but certainly it is true that the number of cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters has declined.

Canadians in particular suffer from the loneliness of that long distance feeling since the rate of geographical mobility of Canadian families is among the highest in the industrialized world. More than 50% of Canadians change residence, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood or from town to town, once every five years. Households can rely less and less on family networks of support and as a result we are beginning to notice the signs of stress of family members, particularly women. Recently the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women produced a publication entitled "Women, Paid/Unpaid Work, and Stress". With 61% of all women with children under the age of 16 active in the labour force, it is not surprising that for many families, the age of overtime mothers and undertime fathers is upon us.

While families struggle to meet their responsibilities in the workplace and at home, many governments are, for budgetary considerations, looking more and more to families to pick up the slack of such things as home-based health care for husbands or partners, children, relatives and parents, both inside and outside their own home. As health care costs continue to assume such a large proportion of our tax dollars, there is strong pressure to return many of the health and social function to families once again. Only this time, there is often no one at home anymore to assume this "health guardian role".

It is highly unlikely that the nineties will see any great change in the rate of women's labour force participation. The reasons for the increases

of the past twenty years are many: economic need, decreasing purchasing power of the average industrial male wages, attitudinal change among younger and older Canadians, demographic change, growing significance of the service sector of the economy and market-place and government incentives to labour force participation. And despite the more equal rates of participation of men and women in the labour force, responsibilities for domestic labour are not equally shared. Children also increasingly receive care from adults who are not their parents at some time during the day, in addition to the time spent in school.

Whatever happened to the "leisure society" that was going to overtake us all. Few of us feel more leisured or have more free time than years ago. Instead, the average routine for the average family usually means up early in the morning in time to get kids dressed, lunches made and kids delivered to daycare or school before mother and father must arrive at work themselves. Hopefully there isn't a snowstorm tying up traffic on the Queensway to help you in the futile effort to get to work on time.

A regular day of business, full of meetings, schedules, noise, pressure, hurried lunch, with a quick call home around 3:30 p.m. to make sure that those who are supposed to be at home are in fact at home doing what they are supposed to be doing. Or off to the babysitter hoping that we are not late ensuring that the caregiver will charge us with breach of contract or even worse, refuse to care for the baby anymore. Then home to prepare a meal while TV babysits the kids. Twice a week off to the community college to take a course on Introduction to Microprocessing for the sake of career advancement. Baths, homework and scheduled amount of time for

interpersonal relating or quality time before watching the National which thank goodness comes on at 10:00 instead of 11:00 p.m. because someone realized we couldn't keep our eyes open past 10:30. And on the weekends, up early and off to Canadian Tire to purchase replacement parts for the time saving device that won't work anymore. And to the grocery store for stuff to make lunches the following week, as well as something special for the Sunday dinner when we have friends over.

What would we do without television. It is interesting to note that we tend to watch television in the "family" room, suggesting that we are somehow participating in some kind of family interactive situation. Or we watch it in the "living room". Yet television is an uninterruptable activity, unless you have a VCR and so the amount of real family interaction is kept to a minimum, as well as many other foregone activities. For many parents, it is not simply a matter of concern about what children are watching but also what their children are <u>not</u> doing when they engage in TV watching. But who has much energy left for anything else. Sometimes I think that family has to make do with just the "leftovers" at the end of the day.

<u>Work and family.</u> Is it a contradiction in terms? Probably the two most important elements in most people's lives and probably the most difficult to put together in any manageable way. It is perhaps one of the hardest challenges facing Canadian families in the nineties.

First, some statistics. Today over 56% of married women are in the paid work force. In 1986, for example, 56% of mothers whose youngest child was under the age of three participated in the work force, and 66% of those who

had jobs were employed full-time. In two parent families in which the husband was employed, more than 58% of mothers with children under three were in the work force. There are considerable generational differences among working women. More than 74% of women between the ages of 25-44 work outside of the home, but the majority of women in the 45-64 age group have remained full-time homemakers although their labour force participation has now reached over 46%.

Women who are single parents have slightly lower rates of participation in the paid work force. In 1986, 42% of single mothers of children under the age of three were in the work force. Despite the fact that there has been this increase in the number of dual-wage earning families, the average real incomes of Canadian families have remained static since 1976. In fact, according to the National Council on Welfare, the number of low-income families would rise by a huge 62% if these couples could not rely on the incomes of wives.

What do these statistics mean in practical terms? What is the day to day reality of families struggling to cope with family responsibility and pay the grocery bills.

Family responsibilities are notorious for being untidy. They don't often fit easily into the after work hours. Children do not tailor their illnesses to coincide with evening and weekends. Parent teacher meetings do not always fall neatly after 6:00 p.m. An aging parent cannot always be relied upon to refrain from having an urgent crisis requiring family help only on statutory holidays. So how do families juggle the very real demands of family and the equally important demands of the job.

Generally, families do not cope as well as they would like. One of the major stumbling blocks is, of course, the lack of adequate, accessible, affordable, quality childcare. Locating available sources of childcare can be like joining a secret society. You have to find the underground network -know someone who knows someone - and then hope that the space you find is adequate or accessible or affordable or high quality. It is unlikely that you will find a space that meets all four criteria. And then you had better hope that your child never gets sick because the day care centre does not accept sick children. And you had better hope that your afternoon meeting does not run late because the day caregiver cannot keep your child beyond a certain hour. And you had better hope that you do not have to travel in your job.

There is no doubt that with the increasing number of dual wage earner families in the nineties, the workplace will suffer from the pull of family responsibilities. One of the leading causes of absenteeism is the breakdown of childcare arrangements or the needs of a sick child. Many parents, particularly mothers, are forced to use their own sick leave to cover the illness of a child. Interestingly, the proportion of men and women absent for family needs shows that women are in fact more likely to be absent if there is a problem with small children whereas men are more likely to be absent if there is an older child in need.

The quality of childcare also affect parents' performance on the job. And for those without after school childcare, the 3:30 p.m. phone call to confirm that the latchkey kids are safe at home is well-known in most offices. For many parents, a patchwork of childcare involving a variety of

arrangements during different times of the day adds to the complexity and stress for both parents and children. Multiple arrangements are more likely to come unglued somewhere along the line, leading to more parental absenteeism. And, no doubt, more marital stress and less happy parenting.

Family responsibilities are not confined to the needs of children. One in nine families is presently headed by a person 65 years of age or older. As we move into the nineties, the proportion of older people to younger is growing. As well, women are older now when they bear their first child than they were twenty years ago, with the median age of first-time mothers having risen to 25.5 years in 1986 from 22.8 in 1971. The result of this change in the distribution of young and old in the population is a growing phenomenon known as the "sandwich generation". Middle-aged parents coping with their children and their own parents. In fact, over 2/3 of families have two caregiving responsibilities. While childcare needs may be relatively short term, the need for eldercare can extend over a considerable number of years, particularly as the health of our older population continues to improve at a time when there is an increasing emphasis on avoiding institutional care for the elderly in favour of more community based at-home care.

I have already mentioned that the responsibilities for domestic labour are not equally shared in most households. Yet there are certain fundamental functions which are essential to family life. It is estimated that housework time varies from a low of about 25 hours per week for dual-earner families with no children to a high of about 67 hours per week in families with a child of less than a year old. In the case of single-

parent families, the additional burden placed on the one parent to provide all things makes the integration of work and family particularly difficult.

Whatever the family situation, whatever the distribution of tasks within households, most families struggle to find ways to ease the often exhausting exercise of combining work and family responsibilities. At a time when employers and employees are increasingly troubled over workplace conflicts arising from new pressures of family life, some employers have begun to recognize the need to accommodate the special family responsibilities that fall to their employees, as family obligations play a greater role in the career choices of both men and women. Quite apart from creating a more caring workplace, employers have realized that more responsive personnel policies contribute to increased productivity, and represent an investment in "human capital", since the dependent children of today will be the workforce of tomorrow. And it should never be forgotten that the Chief Executive Officer of today often has significant family responsibilities herself.

Corporate culture is slowly changing though as employers and employees recognize the legitimacy and importance of company policies that are "family friendly". Time flexibility and management flexibility are essential practical responses to workers with family responsibilities. Some examples presently in place in a variety of work situations across Canada include flex-time; permanent part-time; personal leave for family responsibilities; personnel training to educate supervisors in a more sensitive response to employees' family issues; information and referral to community resources; work-related child care, either on site or through

subsidies; work at home; job sharing; and maternity-paternity leave options. The variety of responses needs to be as diverse as the family situations confronting employees.

There is no doubt that the Canadian work environment will have to change in the nineties, albeit too slowly for some. Already we are seeing the "menu style" fringe benefit packages which allow employees to tailor their fringe benefits to their particular family situation. But even in working environments where more flexible personnel policies have been introduced, there is often a reluctance on the part of employees and in particular male employees, to take advantage of them. Small businesses may find it especially difficult to provide complete flexibility to their employees. When all is said and done, there still remains a corporate culture which generally does not encourage parents, especially fathers, to take time away from work in order to stay with a sick child or attend a parent-teacher consultation. So much of this activity continues to take place, hidden behind the more acceptable personal sickness leave and assumed by female employees.

Another problem with such "family friendly" policies can be the right to financial support during leave. Such support is not necessarily automatic, and therefore families can be penalized financially. Maternity leave is a good example, with supplementary leave beyond the Unemployment Insurance provisions available to varying degrees, both paid and unpaid. It can be argued that the chronic shortage of child care spaces is due, in large measure to the fact that parental/maternal leave provisions do not, in general, allow parents to remain at home with their newborns for longer

periods of time if they wish. A survey taken in Ottawa a couple of years ago found that the majority of new parents would have preferred to stay home during the first year of their children's life if workplace policies would have allowed. Unfortunately most do not and childcare outside of the home becomes essential. Perhaps we should accord as much importance to reproduction as we do production.

The nineties will see a continuing trend toward an increasing percentage of the population over the age of 65. Whereas it was young people who made up two thirds of the dependent population in 1971, by the mid twenties, it will be the over 65's that claim that percentage. Still, among western industrialized nations, Canada still remains one of the youngest old populations. As well, by 2025, women will constitute 60% of the elderly population. Although the overall rates of poverty for all groups has declined since 1981, the rate of childhood poverty has increased, with long term consequences for the entire population. Certainly for many parents, the issues they will be facing into the nineties continue to be drug use or premature sexual experimentation and the damage either can do. And for all of us, concern for the integrity of the environment takes a prominent position as a critical issue for the nineties.

With the pace of economic and technological change, many parents wonder about the security of their own futures. As well, they worry about their ability to prepare their children to face what some believe will be a future of diminishing expectations in which the value of any particular occupational skill is fleeting.

The future takes shape with our actions of today. What I have accomplished in this presentation is a quick review of what is family at present, how it fells and what it does. Implied in the various tensions and contradictions is society's and our culture's ambivalence about children and the families who care for them on society's behalf.

The primary issue for the nineties and beyond is to what extent will society once again treat families with children as significant contributors to the society and therefore worthy of support by those who do not have children. Will we as a culture reverse the current perception of children as being the sole "privatized" responsibility of "mother and father"? Can this society move beyond family as an "overloaded fuse" and generate the enthusiastic investment it requires?